

Recognizing your shadow self is about becoming a whole person

Hot and cold. Good and bad. Light and dark.

We're surrounded by binary forces that are seemingly in opposition with each other. When you start to look at them a little closer, you begin to realize that many of these things work together in tandem. And when it comes to thinking of ourselves as complete individuals, there's certainly more to our identities than meets the eye. In fact, many of us may have a dark side — a so-called “shadow self” — that we like to keep hidden despite it being a big part of who we are.

Registered psychotherapist Natacha Duke, MA, RP, explains why the shadow self is not necessarily as terrible as it sounds and how shadow work can help you embrace your “dark side” features.

What is shadow work?

Shadow work and the idea of a shadow self carries a lot of negative connotations. Some of us might conjure up images of Peter Pan's shadow, the rambunctious, primitive opposite of our storybook hero who always makes matters worse. Others might think of a haunting shadow instead, the kind that lurks just around the bend or a dark side that calls to our more sinister nature.

But in truth, shadow work and the shadow self aren't as scary as they appear. In fact, they provide a great deal of enlightenment when it comes to how we identify and regulate our emotions and how we perceive ourselves and the world around us.

“Shadow work” and the “shadow self” are terms derived by the Swiss founder of analytical psychology Carl Jung. The idea of shadow work is that we all have parts of ourselves that we've repressed or largely ignored. Those long-forgotten aspects of our personalities, the parts of our identity that we've come to reject, make up our shadow self.

“The parts we hide from ourselves are not inherently good or bad,” says Duke. “They're just a part of who we are.”

And though we may reject these aspects of our identity, they still reside in our unconscious mind as a part of our core sense of self. It's up to us, then, to explore and uncover those parts we've repressed over time. By doing shadow work, we can find ways to accept those long-hidden parts of ourselves and integrate those aspects of our shadow self into our overall identity in the effort to become a whole person.

“We often refer to shadow work as working on our blind spots,” notes Duke. “Often, the shadow self is created in childhood when we're told that something about ourselves is bad or that there's a part of ourselves that is not OK or unlovable.”

If you grew up as a very talkative child, your parents might have told you repeatedly to be quiet or talk less often in social settings. In order to feel loved and accepted, you might've started to repress that talkative aspect of your personality. And over time, as you continued to repress those parts, your shadow held onto those feelings until they bubble over or they're triggered by external stimuli.

“What we resist persists,” states Duke. “We start to be triggered by the traits that we possess in our shadow self. And when we don't work on our blind spots, they come out in our relationships.”

Another example: If you view yourself as a really generous person and you value that strongly, there's a good chance that within your shadow self, you might have repressed feelings of selfishness.

“What's going to happen is that every time you encounter someone who is putting themselves first, you might be triggered and those feelings will bubble up for you,” says Duke. “This person might not be doing anything right or wrong — maybe they're just putting themselves first, making themselves a priority, or they're not always available to other people and they have boundaries. But if you haven't integrated that part of you that you consider selfish into your personality, you're going to be triggered by that and you're going to have conflict with this person when they show this side of themselves.”

At its core, shadow work is about discovering what sets you off and identifying the underlying causes for why they trigger such strong emotional reactions. It's also about self-acceptance and coming to terms with the parts of your identity that carry any sort of unnecessary and unhelpful shame or guilt.

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“It’s good to be able to see the beauty in all parts of yourself,” says Duke. “It’s not that the shadow self is holding bad things at all. It’s that the shadow self could unlock new and exciting aspects of your personality that you’ve actively been avoiding.”

Who is shadow work for and who should avoid it?

“Everyone can benefit from shadow work because we’re all going to benefit from being more self-aware and self-actualized,” says Duke. “But we need to look at how we’re going to do it.”

Because shadow work can unearth potentially uncomfortable and complex emotions related to the things you’ve repressed, it’s not advised to do shadow work on your own. In many cases, all types of therapy lend themselves to shadow work in some way. Psychoanalytic therapists especially have training in shadow work to dive a little deeper.

“It can be difficult to unlock what we’ve been repressing and uncover that without an objective party,” says Duke. “Often, shadow work is a long-term therapy. So, you want to ensure you have the time and the finances to dedicate to this, and that you’re in a space with your mental wellness to be able to confront some of the things that might come up in therapy.”

Not all shadow work is trauma-related, but if you’ve experienced trauma, shadow work can be particularly challenging and unsettling. You’ll likely revisit some of the events surrounding your initial trauma, so preparing for that experience and having a therapist to guide you through that process is really important to your health and wellness.

If you have any underlying mental health conditions like anxiety or depression that’s been recently triggered or difficult to manage, you may also want to prioritize treating those conditions before diving into shadow work, as they could cause additional complications during your therapeutic journey.

“If you’re experiencing any acute issues like panic attacks or insomnia that’s affecting your everyday functioning, I would look into coping strategies for that prior to doing shadow work,” advises Duke. “We need to be able to regulate our emotions to a reasonable extent before we can begin to do shadow work because it could bring up quite a bit of unexpected or uncomfortable emotions that are difficult to work through in the beginning.”

Benefits of shadow work

There isn’t much peer-reviewed research on shadow work, as it’s hard to measure. Shadow work can be done in so many different ways and people are affected by shadow work differently.

“Being able to validate how you’re feeling and see those aspects of your personality in a different light is enough for some people,” notes Duke. “For others, they might need more techniques or deeper work to come to terms with how they feel about themselves.”

There are several benefits to shadow work, including:

- Improved self-esteem and self-acceptance.
- Feeling like a whole person and having a holistic sense of self.
- Strengthened relationships with other people.
- Learning healthy coping mechanisms and how to set boundaries.
- Ability to confront regrets and stop negative self-talk.
- How to get started with shadow work
- Before starting shadow work, it can be beneficial to keep a running tab of every time you experience a strong mental, physical or emotional reaction to people and things happening around you. What makes you irrationally angry? What moves you to sadness? When do you feel uncomfortable but can’t quite put your finger on the reasons why you’re feeling anxious, afraid, lonely or confused?

“Journaling your experiences is a really good start because once you begin to notice what you’re dealing with, you can’t unnotice it,” says Duke.

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During your earliest visits with a therapist, you'll likely be asked to share some of these experiences and recount how events unfolded, how they made you feel and how you reacted to them. The focus in the beginning will likely be on what your goals are for shadow work.

"Do you want to have better relationships? Do you want to feel like a more integrated person? Do you not feel whole? Are you experiencing a lot of anxiety or low self-esteem? These are all general questions we might go over in the beginning," explains Duke.

Your therapist will also likely ask thorough questions about your childhood history and what life was like as you were growing up with your primary caregivers.

"Understanding the family dynamics and understanding your childhood is really where understanding your shadow self begins because often there's some generational trauma that gets passed down," Duke further explains. "What traits were you told to embrace? What traits were you told to avoid? What were your ideas of good and bad behavior and good and bad traits? What were you rewarded for? What were you punished for? These can all be good starting points in looking at what the shadow might be hiding."

From there, your therapist will work with you in a collaborative process to identify aspects of your shadow self and come up with techniques to help you accept, process and embrace those parts of your personality in your day-to-day life.

"We uncover these things together because they're blind spots," says Duke. "You're not always going to recognize these blind spots and you may not even accept them at first. But after a few therapy sessions, months down the line, you might start to recognize parts of yourself you want to touch on."

Depending on your therapist, you might also participate in other activities as part of your therapy to help this process along. In some cases, people will do a chair or mirror exercise, where you project your shadow self across from you and have a conversation with your shadow self to confront your feelings. Art therapy and psychodrama can also be a part of your ongoing treatment.

As you're going through this process, you'll also want to make sure you set aside time for self-care and positive self-soothing activities that keep you grounded and feeling safe and supported.


Remember: You're not alone in this journey of self-discovery, and every part of who you are is just as important as the parts you've always loved before.

"Often, with shadow work, you might feel worse before you feel better," says Duke. "Grounding techniques will help will put you back to the here and now, and that can include meditation or exercise — all things that are important to your physical, mental and emotional health."

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Shadow Work Prompts for Healing

- What old wounds, traumas, or pains have you not fully processed?
 - How are you still carrying anger/resentment?
 - What parts of yourself do you judge as unacceptable?
 - Which emotions do you try to deny or numb?
 - What unhealthy patterns keep showing up? Where did they originate?
 - What behaviors do you use to cover up insecurities?
 - What limiting beliefs hold you back from growth?
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SHADOW WORK PROMPTS FOR SELF RESPECT:

- 1) Which specific circumstances make me feel undervalued or overlooked?
- 2) When have I compromised my principles for the sake of fitting in or pleasing others?
- 3) Reflect on recurring relationship dynamics where I feel disregarded. How do I contribute to these dynamics?
- 4) What internal beliefs or critical thoughts hinder my confidence in certain situations?
- 5) Recall instances where I didn't stand up for myself. What stopped me from asserting my needs or boundaries?
- 6) How can I cultivate more kindness and understanding toward myself, fostering a healthier sense of worth and value?

SHADOW WORK

- What emotions do I tend to repress or avoid, and why?
- In what ways do I tend to self-sabotage or hold myself back?
- What are my biggest fears, and how do they affect my actions and decisions?
- What negative beliefs or thought patterns do I have about myself, and where did they come from?
- What is something I've been avoiding or procrastinating on, and why?
- What parts of myself do I feel ashamed of or try to hide from others?
- How do I react when I feel threatened or vulnerable, and why?
- In what ways do I tend to overcompensate or seek validation from others?
- What parts of myself am I afraid to acknowledge or face, and why?

Source: ***Embrace the Dark Feminine***
by Ann Hill

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21 Simple Shadow Work Prompts To Embrace Your True Self.



1. What makes me feel most alive inside?
2. What part of me deserves more grace?
3. What part of me needs more love?
4. What truth am I ready to bring to light?
5. Where do I dim my inner light?
6. What strengths have I been hiding lately?
7. What makes me feel truly powerful?
8. What joy am I ready to claim?
9. What part of me feels most free?
10. What do I need to forgive myself for?
11. When do I feel most like me?
12. What's one brave thing I've already done?
13. What limiting story can I rewrite today?
14. How am I evolving in this season of my life?
15. What brings peace to my inner world?
16. What version of me needs celebrating now?
17. What new truth is calling my name?
18. How can I show up with love?
19. What desire have I buried too long?
20. How can I trust myself even more?
21. What would I do if I felt whole?

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THE SHADOW

manifestmoons

WHAT IS THE SHADOW SELF?

"The shadow" was first brought into the western world by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. He described the shadow as the unconscious and disowned parts of our personalities that the ego fails to see, acknowledge, and accept. It is any aspect of ourselves that is not exposed to the light of our consciousness.



How the SHADOW self forms

The reason we disown parts of our personality goes back to our childhood, upbringing and events that occurred during our formative years.

As children, we are born whole and complete, but that wholeness is short-lived.

The shadow is born in our childhood as a product of certain interactions we had with the people closest to us. Our caretakers make us believe that certain aspects of ourselves are good and others are not. The aspects that are seen as bad are rejected or suppressed, and consequently, form the shadow.

THE FOUR MAIN Jungian Archetypes

THE PERSONA

The personality that an individual projects to others, which is different from the authentic self.

THE ANIMA/ANIMUS

The anima is a feminine image in the male psyche.

The animus is a male image in the female psyche. The anima/animus represents the "true self".

THE SELF

The self archetype represents the unified unconsciousness and consciousness of an individual.

THE SHADOW

The shadow exists as part of the unconscious mind and is composed of repressed ideas, weaknesses, desires, instincts, and shortcomings.



"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."